

VZCZCXRO9056
OO RUEHAG RUEHBC RUEHDE RUEHDIR RUEHKUK RUEHLH RUEHPW RUEHROV
DE RUEHRH #1170/01 2120522
ZNY SSSSS ZZH
O 300522Z JUL 08
FM AMEMBASSY RIYADH
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC IMMEDIATE 8883
INFO RUEHXX/ARAB ISRAELI COLLECTIVE IMMEDIATE
RUCNMEM/EU MEMBER STATES COLLECTIVE IMMEDIATE
RUEHZM/GULF COOPERATION COUNCIL COLLECTIVE IMMEDIATE
RUEHZJ/HUMAN RIGHTS COUNCIL COLLECTIVE IMMEDIATE
RUCNISL/ISLAMIC COLLECTIVE IMMEDIATE
RUEHMD/AMEMBASSY MADRID IMMEDIATE 0182
RUEHJI/AMCONSUL JEDDAH IMMEDIATE 9652
RUEHRH/CHUSMTM RIYADH SA IMMEDIATE
RHMFISS/COMUSCENTAF SHAW AFB SC IMMEDIATE
RHRMAKS/COMUSNAVCENT IMMEDIATE
RUEKDIA/DIA WASHINGTON DC IMMEDIATE
RHMFISS/HQ USCENTCOM MACDILL AFB FL IMMEDIATE
RHEHNSC/NSC WASHDC IMMEDIATE
RUEKJCS/SECDEF WASHDC IMMEDIATE
RUEHBS/USEU BRUSSELS IMMEDIATE
RHEHAAA/WHITE HOUSE WASHINGTON DC IMMEDIATE

S E C R E T SECTION 01 OF 05 RIYADH 001170

NOFORN
SIPDIS

DEPARTMENT PLEASE PASS TO NEA/ARP BMCGRATH

E.O. 12958: DECL: 07/29/2018
TAGS: [ASEC](#) [CIA](#) [EU](#) [EUN](#) [KDEM](#) [KISL](#) [KMDR](#) [KPAO](#) [PGOV](#)
PHUM, PREL, PTER, SA, SP
SUBJECT: KING ABDULLAH'S INTERFAITH DIALOGUE AND THE MADRID
CONFERENCE

REF: A. RIYADH 1133
[1](#)B. RIYADH 1035
[1](#)C. RIYADH 1162
[1](#)D. RIYADH 1090
[1](#)E. RIYADH 1070

Classified By: Charge de Affairs Michael Gfoeller for
reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

[1](#)1. (S/NF) SUMMARY. The Saudi-hosted Madrid Conference for Interfaith Dialogue won King Abdullah bin Abdulaziz Al Saud praise from local media and Embassy contacts alike. It has the potential to lead to greater religious tolerance, with the tangible effect of defusing extremism and associated terrorism. Saudis and third-country diplomats supported the King's initiative, while making revealing and skeptical comments about the path ahead. Internet commentary effectively highlighted the viewpoints of some critics. However, internet commentary was limited, which could be assessed as an indictment of the Interfaith Dialogue by the ordinarily rather conservative section of Saudi society that contributes to these sites. This historic initiative by King Abdullah faces some senior internal royal family opposition, as well as resistance from the highly conservative religious class. END SUMMARY.

SAG OFFICIALS SUPPORT THE KING...

[1](#)2. (S/NF) Within Saudi Arabia, support for the Madrid conference has been vocal, but not necessarily unanimous. Embassy contacts in the SAG support the King's initiative, and their views mirror commentary in the local press (Reftel A). There was criticism of perceived Saudi government hypocrisy by many of our local contacts - unofficial Saudis and third country diplomats - about how lasting this Interfaith Dialogue will be and if it will truly result in actual religious tolerance within Saudi Arabia.

[1](#)3. (S/NF) Saudi judges preparing to embark on a U.S. exchange

program explained that the Dialogue demonstrates "true Islam." The judges, a highly conservative group by any measure, said that Islam is a religion of "peace and tolerance." They added that the conference served to correct misunderstanding and combat the "clash of civilizations" viewpoint often vilified inside the Kingdom. The judges did not deny that some might view the Dialogue as compromising the true teachings of Islam, but that the benefits of the Dialogue outweighed this concern. Dr. Mufleh Al-Kahtani (strictly protect), Vice President of the independent but pro-government National Society for Human Rights, praised the initiative, stressing that it should be included in the next report on International Religious Freedom. He also lamented that Saudi Arabia was still behind in advancing human rights. When asked if the Kingdom could host a future conference, Al-Kahtani considered this unlikely because of the difficulty of hosting Jews, especially Israelis, in Saudi Arabia.

... BUT SOME ROYALS OPPOSE

¶4. (S/NF) There are confidential reports that Crown Prince Sultan bin Abdulaziz Al Saud and Governor of Riyadh Prince Salman bin Abdulaziz Al Saud voiced private opposition to King Abdullah about this initiative, since it placed the other monotheistic faiths on an equal footing with Islam. Apparently Abdullah had to negotiate heatedly with these two senior royals to get them to at least acquiesce to the Interfaith Dialogue. While there was much positive local

RIYADH 00001170 002 OF 005

press coverage, there were no media reports of other Saudi royals joining this initiative. Also, according to King Abdullah, Spanish King Juan Carlos was enthusiastic to host this conference hosted in Madrid (Reftel B). However, per the Spanish Political Counselor in Riyadh (strictly protect), King Juan Carlos was actually cool to the proposal of having this type of multi-faith conference on Spanish soil as it conflicted with more secular Spanish policy and he considered it hypocritical for Saudi Arabia, with a poor record on human rights and religious tolerance, to take the lead in global religious tolerance. The Spanish agreed to host this conference in order to maintain good relations with oil-rich Saudi Arabia, according to the Spanish Embassy in Riyadh.

THE ROLE OF WOMEN, OR LACK THEREOF

¶5. (S/NF) A Jeddah city counselor and businessman valued the idea of the conference, but voiced reservations. He contended that the Kingdom needs a stronger policy of religious tolerance as well as less media bias in religious coverage. He also chided the absence of women as "ridiculous." The head of the women's office of Jeddah's Human Rights Commission lamented that Saudi women were not permitted to participate. Prior to the conference, she requested permission to attend from the World Muslim League (WML) and the Saudi Royal Protocol office. The WML official informed her that women could not attend, but perhaps could participate in a subsequent event.

¶6. (S/NF) One Saudi woman did play a role. King Abdullah asked Susan Baaghil, the first recognized Saudi female photographer, to photo document the conference. Baaghil believes that her very presence signaled the importance the King has placed on broadening the role of women in this religious tolerance initiative. Based on this success, she believes that any future Interfaith Dialogue will draw more women as speakers as well as organizers. Baaghil commented that the gathering is aligned with the King's open and inclusive leadership style, noting the positive and friendly behind-the-scenes interactions between Jewish, Christian, Hindu, Buddhist, and Muslim participants. The collegial and convivial atmosphere of the conference extended into

mealtimes, facilitating candid photographs of different religious leaders, highlighted by the lively interaction between the King and prominent religious leaders. Baaghil believes that Saudi-hosted international gatherings, such as the Madrid Conference, raise the King's stature among world leaders. Recent suggestions in the Saudi press that the King should be nominated for the Nobel Peace Prize point to the positive perception of reforms currently occurring in the kingdom.

SUSTAINABILITY UNCERTAIN

¶7. (S/NF) Liberal Saudis lauded King Abdullah's efforts. The chairman of a local media company described the dialogue as a forward-thinking strategy to combat extremism and show the Kingdom in a more tolerant light. In his view, the Dialogue is one in a long series of moves by the King to bring greater openness, dating back to his time as Crown Prince. Lingering is a sense that these efforts live and die with the King, and that the initiative would wither under the rule of any potential successor, especially Crown Prince Sultan. Riyadh's broader diplomatic community followed the conference from the sidelines. Several third-country diplomats from Muslim countries conveyed little more than superficial knowledge of the conference. One Egyptian diplomat voiced

RIYADH 00001170 003 OF 005

deep skepticism. He pointed out that actions are needed more than words, and echoed the sentiment that the King's successor would likely not continue the initiative.

¶8. (S/NF) A prominent Saudi human rights activist hypothesized that, if anything, the Dialogue "will result in more (terrorist) attacks" in Saudi Arabia. Further, he claimed that this would be in the interest of the Ministry of Interior (MOI), whose budget has swelled along with the responsibility of breaking terrorist networks in the kingdom. The activist stated that the Interfaith Dialogue is nothing more than a public relations ploy. He said it is possible to challenge the conservative establishment, citing Kings Abdulaziz and Faisal as examples. He contrasted these rulers with King Abdullah, who "does not have the muscle" to push this type of reform. "The King can't match Sultan and Naif" he opined, referring to the Crown Prince and Interior Minister. Supporting the position that the Dialogue could anger religious extremists is the recent al-Qaeda internet video referring to the dialogue as "an integral part of the overt Crusader war against Islam and Muslims."

INTERNET DEBATE

¶9. (S/NF) Commentary in the highly conservative, bigoted world of the Saudi internet was limited, which can be assessed as an indictment of the Interfaith Dialogue as bloggers would fear retribution for openly criticizing King Abdullah. Response from the blogosphere has been muted, with a few exceptions. A writer on the influential Al-Saha site (www.alsaha.com) published an article criticizing the dialogue. The writer opined that the Madrid conference is a public relations blessing for al-Qaeda, with official Saudi religious scholars "sitting side by side with those who worship cows or statues." Such images, particularly those featuring King Abdullah, undermine the government's religious legitimacy in the eyes of extremists. The writer mocks the idea that such a conference could be held inside the Kingdom. He quotes a Koranic verse to those calling for interfaith dialogue: "Never will the Jews or Christians be satisfied with thee unless thou follow their form of religion." Numerous readers chimed in by strongly rejecting the article and supporting the King.

¶10. (S/NF) A second internet commentary accentuated the

positive. A writer (likely a non-Saudi Arab) on the Elaph site (www.elaph.com) wrote, "What's amazing is that the state organizing and sponsoring the Madrid conference is Saudi Arabia, with its Wahhabi doctrine, which does not recognize other religions, and describes them as false religions." The writer added that the conference could not have been held in Saudi Arabia, where "some voices oppose the Conference and the concept of dialoging peacefully with non-Muslims. Voices who believe that only blood can interact with infidels."

LIFE ON THE STREET

¶11. (S/NF) Discussion with post's non-Muslim contacts reveals no noteworthy change in daily life for them. Of course, it is only two weeks since the Interfaith Dialogue conference concluded. Under an agreement negotiated three years ago by Ambassador at Large for International Religious Freedom John Hanford, the Saudis have exhibited moderately greater religious tolerance vis-a-vis non-Muslim faiths. In recent years, non-Muslims have been able to worship privately as long as they kept out of sight. Society at large resists this turnaround. Overall, non-Muslim contacts are hopeful

RIYADH 00001170 004 OF 005

for more tolerance within the Kingdom, but acknowledge parts of Saudi society remain resistant to change. We still see religious intolerance - most recently a group of 16 Asian Christians in Taif are facing deportation simply because of their faith (Reftel C).

COMMENT

¶12. (S/NF) Saudi Arabia is a conservative, society resistant to change, but led by a pious king seeking to impose more liberal and tolerant attitude. That King Abdullah hosted a true Interfaith Dialogue is remarkable and historic. This is a significant step to combat extremism, which has the realistic potential to defuse violent acts of terrorism. While this conference had international media coverage with global appeal, Abdullah's true target audience was Saudi Arabia itself. The Kingdom of Saudi Arabia is a top down society. The images of the Custodian of the Two Holy Mosques embracing not only Christians, but Jews too, is a highly controversial act for many, if not most, Saudis. We interpret this as "shock treatment" intended to challenge Saudi society to become more tolerant, with the King setting the example for a new form of behavior. However, King Abdullah must overcome bigoted domestic resistance to continue this Interfaith initiative, especially if a future Dialogue session is to be conducted on Saudi soil. Of note are the limited but negative internet blogs regarding this initiative. Such opinions should not be dismissed lightly: they reflect the views of a significant portion of Saudi society. The fact that a key al-Qaeda figure has publicly called for King Abdullah to be killed in response for calling for the Interfaith Dialogue that "amounted to joining a Western crusade against Islam," demonstrates that this initiative is more than a publicity stunt as some skeptics have described it.

¶13. (S/NF) King Abdullah is a pious Muslim of bedouin heritage with a strict conservative upbringing, yet he has shown an open mind. His religious leadership harkens back to the King-as-Imam paradigm that lasted until the death of his father King Abdulaziz bin Saud (reign 1926-1953), the founder of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. King Abulaziz, when he reigned, set much of the political, moral and religious tone of the Kingdom. The situation has since evolved to the point where the King handles politics and economics, while the religious Ulema handle the societal issues. King Abdullah is now working to reassert a degree of religious authority by setting the precedent of establishing greater religious

tolerance than any previous Saudi ruler.

¶14. (S/NF) King Abdullah is attempting to combine moral and political leadership in the mold of King Faisal bin Abdulaziz (reign 1964-1975), whose reforms included allowing girl's education and introducing television. Both kings are known for their austere personal piety, which gives them credibility to act on reforms - a piety not shared by King Saud (known as the "playboy prince, reign 1953-1964)) who succeeded King Abdulaziz; or Saudi Arabia's previous monarch, King Fahd bin Abdulaziz Al Saud (reign 1981-2005, and de facto prime minister 1975-1981) - all known for hedonistic excesses. But King Abdullah, and King Faisal before him, share unimpeachable religious and moral credentials, which provide political cover to implement reform. King Abdullah is also a pragmatic strategic thinker. We interpret his reasoning to be how he can ensure that the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia survives and prospers in the 21st century under the House of Saud. He initiated this Interfaith Dialogue not because he had a metaphysical epiphany, but rather as a way for the Kingdom to resist extremists, both tomorrow and in

RIYADH 00001170 005 OF 005

fifty years.

¶15. (S/NF) We anticipate the conservative Ulema who effectively run the religious establishment in Saudi Arabia will continue to resist further progress toward religious tolerance. They will likely crack down on "religious infractions" in a public manner in order to send a message to the King and his supporters. King Abdullah and the pro-tolerant Saudis will certainly counter the religious conservatives, likely by upstaging them in the realm of public opinion which generally favors the King. So long as King Abdullah perseveres, using his finely-honed tribal negotiating skills to garner further support from various Saudi factions, we expect him to prevail. That said, tangible change in Saudi society will take place slowly, at least by western standards.

¶16. (S/NF) Holding the conference in Madrid allowed the King to sidestep the opposition to hosting such an event in Saudi Arabia - the Islamic holy land. While the true opinion of other royals remains publicly unstated, we believe there is substance to the belief that some of them do not share the King's enthusiasm for Interfaith Dialogue. The King's legacy will lie in his ability to influence the detractors - from all corners - and build a society more accepting of religious differences.

¶17. (S/NF) Sustaining this religious tolerance initiative beyond King Abdullah's rule could be problematic, as shown by Crown Prince Sultan and Prince Salman's reported opposition to the Interfaith Dialogue. It is noteworthy that these royals are Abdullah's half-brothers (Sudairis). Should a prince of more liberal leanings, such as Chief of General Intelligence Prince Muqrin Bin Abdulaziz Al Saud, eventually become King, the chance of this initiative continuing may improve. Its lasting success extends beyond the advancement of human rights, it can have the tangible effect of defusing extremism and associated terrorism. While momentum in public opinion is, for now, on King Abdullah's side, further action by the Saudis is needed to show that this will be more than a public relations maneuver.

GFOELLER